

***The Earth on its Axis, We in our Skin: The Tantra of Embodiment***  
**A Conversation between Lata Mani & Kabir Sanjay Bavikatte**  
**HD, 2015, 80minutes, Director: Nicolás Grandi**

**Transcript**

Kabir: I remember the first time I met you, I came bearing questions. One usually tends to come bearing gifts but the first time I met you I came bearing questions. And these were questions that came up at the middle of my life. What I was grappling with was the question of what must I do. I was at a fork in the road and I didn't really trust my judgment on how I should respond to a situation I was in. But really I think at the heart of it all my question was, "how do I know what I must do?" And I came to you because of the sense of others telling me that you did speak of the essence of things, the integral nature of things, to know oneself at an integral level. And I was seeking that answer, I needed to know myself, what is my essence, what should I do...and there you were. You were trying to speak to me, trying to get me to get a sense of who am I. So who are we, Lata? What is the nature of these things? How do we know what we must do?

Lata: You say that a question is not a gift. I would say that these questions are profound gifts. The question of "Who am I? What should I do?" In many ways it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that we were born to ask these questions. The very nature of the question forecloses answers. The very nature of the question draws out a thinking aloud of the kinds of concepts that can provide us orienting points in thinking through the journey we might wish to take. In that sense, the concepts that we might discuss together are something like the stars in the sky are to the navigator. You orient yourself in relation to the stars in order to plot your journey or to imagine a way forward. And, one way into this conversation is to think of the idea of isness which to me has become profoundly important.

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**Interlude 1**

*Beloved Oneness*

*We awaken to this day with the deepest gratitude for having discovered you within us  
Thank You, thank you for descending on this existence like stars in a tropical sky  
scattering your shiny wisdom for us to awaken to  
We are so moved and so in love  
there aren't enough ways, as Rumi says  
to kneel and kiss the ground*

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Kabir: It also reminds me about the conversation we had about you trying to kind of point to certain things and also in that sense that helped me look inwards. Even then you used this very interesting term called isness. So what does it mean and how did you come upon it?

Lata: It is a beautiful concept and it has become for me a fundamental concept. Isness is that quality of sentience, of aliveness that is specific to every living thing, everything that exists in the universe. Humans have mistakenly divided the universe into that which is sentient and that which is not sentient. But within many cosmologies, Hinduism, Buddhism to draw on two examples, tribal, nature worshipping religions, everything that exists is infinitely alive. And isness is the understanding that everything that exists is not only infinitely alive but also has its own particular vibrancy, vibration, specificity, particularity, and is in a deeply complex, mutually loving, interdependent relationship with every other isness. And all of the isnesses are part of what one might call a non-hierarchical polyexistence which we might name Creation. So not only does everything express and manifest its own particular isness - we know for example that there are no two leaves on a tree that are identical to one another. We also know that there are no two individuals who are also identical to one another. Everyone manifests their own particular energy and their own particularity.

We have forms of social description which look at particular dimensions of isness, okay? Gender is a dimension of isness, race is a dimension of isness. These are particular ways in which isness expresses itself either because it is its nature or because society deems a particular aspect of isness to be significant in a particular way. So, for example, rather than see racial diversity as simply being natural, it is then converted into a system of social hierarchization, right? So you take the fact of diversity, and there is no end to diversity, there is infinite diversity in the world in which we live. But certain dimensions of diversity have become politicized or have received a certain kind of social understanding. And we often tend to think of ourselves in relation to those categories. Where isness is really, really helpful is to help us to understand that those categories only imperfectly capture the full range of what it means to be "Kabir," what it means to be "Lata," what it means to be any individual being living in a given time. And quite often when we come to crisis, partly what is being brought to crisis is one's self-understanding in relation to those categories.

So if your orienting points or anchorage point has been family, sexuality, caste, gender, nation, career, right? Quite often in a moment of crisis you realize that those may have been your points of orientation but there is something to you prior to all of it, beyond all of it, in the midst of all of it which is only being imperfectly captured by

those categories. And the idea of isness enables you to open yourself to that possibility, to the fecundity of something that is prior to, primordial and simultaneously true.

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## **Interlude 2**

### **Music**

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Kabir: Could you speak a little more about how you came upon this, your own isness, and this sense of, this aha moment, I don't know if there was an "aha moment." How did you come upon this, when it happened did it make sense? Did your life change after that?

Lata: I'm glad you asked me that question because it often occurs to me that when speaks of an idea outside of the context in which it was discovered, um, understood and learned from, it might sound abstract. I discovered isness at a time in my life when almost every other kind of description no longer made sense. This was in context of a head injury which brought my previous life as a very active academic and activist to a complete and abrupt halt. What happened to me in the aftermath of the brain injury was that I was in deep illness, in a terrain of deep illness. And I had no choice but to look around at my new neighborhood which was my body. And my brain because of the injury, my consciousness was very close to my body, very, very present. I was dropped into the present. One just had to be.

In that beingness, gradually, gradually, gradually, I began to observe that even though I could not think in the way that I had thought before – in fact I was not capable of taking care of my most basic physical needs – I was aware that there was an awareness. My awareness might extend to the bed physically. But I was bedridden. I rarely left my bed. But inside my body and inside my bedroom and the contours of the bed I found an entire universe to discover. So I was called, if you like, to pay attention to my isness. Didn't have the word for it then, I was simply being. I wouldn't even have used the word 'being' then.

I was aware at some level of my previous life which had suddenly dissolved having initiated me into this new realm, this new way of inhabiting my life, because friends came to see me, I had to go to the doctor. And in every single one of those encounters I was having to face another description of myself which was equally authentic. So I was coming face to face...isness was coming face to face with social description, right?

I didn't become a citizen of this country without bewilderment. I was deeply bewildered. There was an enormous amount of grief. There was a sense that my whole life had changed and was completely out of control....And...my brain being as injured as it was, my mind was able to keep company closest to the body. And it was at that moment that I discovered the body to be such an enormous site of intelligence. And this is another important aspect of isness. Isness means you have a loving relationship to physicality. Isness, physicality, desire, consciousness, travel very closely together. I would not have thought that prior to this experience.

I gradually came to discover that there were aspects to self that I had been completely oblivious of. I had paid no attention to my body. I certainly did not think of my body as a site of intelligence. I had assumed that everything I needed to learn I would learn from the mind. And I also came to discover in this time the third point in the triad, which is the heart. The heart has its own intelligence as well. I had you might say just lived here (pointing to the head) at the very surface.

And part of what the accident enabled me to do was to start to sink deeper and deeper and deeper into the heart, into body and in that process, and over a period of ten years start to understand what experience might be like if we were to embrace body, mind and heart as a triadic form of intelligence that is available to us all as humans.

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### **Interlude 3**

#### **Music**

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Kabir: So, this kind of makes me curious because... I mean we are constantly told... I mean who we are... on the one hand we have this situation where who we are is supposed to be defined by society, and the context and the social structures that we inhabit or we are born into. And on the other hand you have this sense of who you are is your biology or these kind of basic categories or immutable categories that we have of biology, of what it means to be human. And on the other hand you have some philosophical or spiritual or religious traditions talking about needing to transcend all this to the realm of the spirit and that being essentially who one is. But you refer to isness as being something different, neither this nor that. And so could you speak about what this isness really means and what it is not?

Lata: The first thing I wish to say is that social categories that we use - forms of social description - tend in two directions. There is the point of view that social categories are socially constructed. They are not natural. Then there are other points of view

generally tending towards the more conservative who would say that these are empirical descriptions of true facts. So gender difference is natural would be a position taken by this latter standpoint. Gender as a social construct would be the position taken by the former. And you've also pointed to a third position which is the tendency of many philosophical and religious systems requiring you to transcend those particular categories into which you are born, those things that define human experience. Okay? So we have three points here; we have those that say this is natural and that is why it is named this way and that is why social arrangements have taken the shape and form that they have; you have others who say this is not natural, these differences have been understood in this way and in order to understand why we look to history, society, politics. And then you have spiritual, religious and philosophical systems that say, all this is fine and good but this is not who you are really. You are spirit and in order to access spirit you transcend social categories.

When you begin with isness it's a very different journey. It's a very different way of understanding. First of all, isness is created. It is part of an understanding that the Creator has manifested an infinity, or a near infinitude of isnesses all of which are intended to relate to each other in a mutually loving, cooperative and interdependent way. You may be somebody who does not believe in the Creator. That is fine. What you can do is to observe the way the universe is, observe the way the universe functions and you would have to conclude that things are deeply interconnected. Everything is in a complex dance with everything else.

The glory of isness is that it enables you to avoid both wrapping your arms around the categories society has given you as a kind of mirror in which you can discover yourself: in other words a complete identification with social categories. You avoid that because you understand that your isness exceeds those categories. You also avoid the tendency towards wanting to climb up and above - transcend means to climb up and above - humanness in order to get to your true essence. Isness enables us to breathe deeply into our isness; to try to find the meaning of life, the meaning of our journey, where we might wish to go, in the process of self-discovering, by attending and paying attention to isness.

Now this might sound abstract. But if you think about meditation, what is it that the practice is requesting you to do? Either by following the breath or by watching the mind you quiet yourself down and you become still. Part of the pedagogy is to allow yourself to fall beneath, below, the threshold of perception that you have been operating on. What is it that you fall into? I would say you fall into isness. And as you fall into isness you notice things about yourself that exceed those categories, you notice things about yourself that you may or may not have noticed before, and you

also notice things about the framework that you have used to comprehend and apprehend the world.

When you sit in the stillness of a contemplative practice whatever form that contemplative practice might take, singing a bhajan [devotional song], sitting meditation, undertaking ritual practice, being a karma yogi [one on the path of action] (we can come later to discussing what all those paths are) what are you doing? You are settling into your isness. And as you settle into your isness you are learning about yourself in an entirely new way. The vibrancy, the vibration that is specifically you is precisely what it is that you would need to get to know in order to say, "Who am I outside of all of this, all that I have been taught to think of myself as being?"

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#### **Interlude 4**

##### **Music/Meditation**

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Kabir: I find what you say fascinating, Lata. In one sense it kind of re-enchants what it means to be alive, what it means to be human, the sense that there's something bigger. So this sense of isness, this sensibility that one becomes aware of when one is carefully witnessing or aware of this conversation between heart, mind and the body, is it something that is always there and you just drop in on this conversation that has always been happening long before the identity you put upon yourself? Or is it something that you grow into?

Lata: The very first thing to remember is that it's only the mind that has forgotten isness. The heart remembers isness, the body remembers isness. The mind has forgotten.

Your isness is your steady pulse; the steady pulse of who you are. I would say that as a child, as a baby up to the age of about two or three you are very much comfortable in your isness, as your isness. So in that sense one could say that the first two to three years of an individual's life they are at home in their isness. And it is quite often as they enter the social world and as they enter the educational world that they begin to experience a way of looking at themselves which may either be congruent with their sense of themselves or at variance with their sense of themselves, depending on a whole range of social factors. There isn't a single trajectory. But our isness is always there. It has always been teaching us or pointing us or nudging us in a certain direction but we have never quite known how to listen, how to pay heed and how to act on that instinct.

There is a real challenge in learning how to distinguish instinct from conditioning. Quite a lot of the time that which we think is instinct is conditioning and that which we think may be conditioning, instinct; rarely the latter, most often the former. So how do we find our way back to isness? All of the spiritual wisdoms, all of the tools, the spiritual tools that are available in all the different systems are potential routes to learning how to notice and to pay attention.

To the degree that philosophical systems have come to distrust humanness, they are less likely to direct the attention of those who find in those systems something of value, to embrace their humanness. Say, for example, within Islam it is the uniting of heaven and earth that humanness has the potential to offer any practitioner of that tradition. Within Hinduism you have both poles: you have the life-affirming tantric aspect and you have the life-denying, humanness transcending, aspect. So these two vectors if you like or these two dynamics are to be found in all the religious systems. But to the extent that the practices that these systems offer their practitioners have a logic of their own, even if the philosophical drift, shall we say, is in the direction of abstracting away from the concrete, transcending the human, the practice itself will drop you into your body. The practice itself will take you in that direction. And if you are able to heed the call, isness has the potential to teach you.

Now, isness is not destiny if destiny is to be understood as something foretold, foregone and always already going to be true. Isness is destiny if one throws open that term to understanding that you have come here with a certain set of skills, a certain responsibility if you like, and a certain response ability. And the more you are able to open yourself to discovering your responsibility, you will cultivate the requisite response abilities to make it possible to realize what it is you have come to do. And when responsibility and response ability are congruent you are more at home in your isness. And the more one is at home in one's isness the more peaceful one is, the more trusting one is, and the more happy: where your agency is precisely in that process of introspection, discovery, renegotiation not just of your own isness but of its relationship with other people. Your isness is always relational.

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### Interlude 5

Like tiny pearls  
being dropped one by one  
words fall into empty mind  
The jeweler strings them to make *sutras*  
for anyone who would care to listen

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Kabir: So first I become present to this conversation within myself? Is that what will give me a sense of what my responsibility is? And once I start trying to be true to my responsibility and therefore interacting with the isness of other things will I become more aware of my abilities, my response abilities? Will they formed as a result of this conversation?

Lata: The first premise is we cannot know, we cannot ever fully know the meaning, value and purpose of our lives. So the idea that we can and therefore we can plan for it and we operationalize it is the very first idea that we should leave outside the door. What we are entering into is a deep mystery. But we are given like the stars in the sky to go back to that earlier image, we are given ways that we can orient ourselves so that we can open ourselves to this mystery in a joyful way. If indeed the whole is a complex, non-hierarchical form of polyexistence where we can always only know the most local, how do we live? What does a seeker, one who wishes to know their isness, one who wishes to live in accordance with their isness, in dynamic conversation with their isness, how is such a seeker to proceed?

The seeker proceeds by way of remembering several things. First principle, don't know. Second principle, any knowledge that I do have is situated knowledge. Third principle, given the fact that I don't know and can never know everything, and given the fact that I have at my disposal only situated knowledge, what can I do? Eschew preferences; give up every preconceived notion I have of who I think I should be, how I think I should respond to something. Why? Not so that you can become someone unable to evaluate. But so that you can become someone so free from preexisting ways of thinking about the universe that you can respond in true spontaneity. Okay? Five, [should be four] take joy in the process. "I don't know. I can never know. I am situated. Let me work on eschewing my preferences and let me take joy in the process. Let me not wait until I know so that I can relax!

Remember, what we are most interested in a practice that starts with isness, is in breathing out. We want to be fully alive, fully present. Here. Now. Not in the hereafter. We are not doing penance. We are here to enjoy. And the very last point, and these are five points that the yogi or yogini has to bear in mind...we can think of these as five points of a constellation...the fifth is that the divine is in charge. Now, okay, you're a secularist. You don't want to think of the idea of there being a Creator. Forget that. Practice with these four points of orientation: don't know, situated knowledge, eschewing preferences, taking joy in the process. There is no way you will not discover what your isness is, or what it is that you have come to do. It will be like a day dawning. It will be gradual. It's not like a light switch going on.

One of the most important things to remember about life and about the spiritual journey is that it is in the process of living it that it unfolds itself. That does not mean that we will not discover more and more, incrementally, gradually and eventually

[click of fingers] qualitative, significantly what it is we feel we must do. And as we do this we are constantly checking in with body, mind and heart, inquiring into body's physical discomfort in relation to anything that happens, we're inquiring into the heart's grief, sorrow, depression, tiredness, exhaustion, fatigue. We're also inquiring into mind's unhappiness, wavering nature, incapacity to be still. Each of these is not a failure. Each of these is a sign to be read. The question is do we have the wisdom with which to read these signs? So if we open ourselves with these tools, we will be able to learn how to listen and we'll be able to learn how to read the signs.

Kabir: I think that's really helpful, Lata, that's really helpful because the image I had in my head when you were speaking about the path of the yogi or the yogini and you were pointing out that to be aware of one's own situatedness, to eschew preferences, to take joy in the process, to rest in the "I don't know," and to know that the divine is in charge. I mean I see that almost as a kind of map or signpost to know if you're going in the right direction. What you also spoke about, to check with the mind in terms of "are you feeling distracted, why are you feeling distracted?" to check with the heart, why does it feel heavy or the sense of why does it feeling pain? Or check with the body in terms of tiredness or fatigue. These kinds of things...this almost acts as a kind of compass in terms of are we going in the right direction, are we going to the next signpost, so to speak.

Lata: It's actually a mind-blowingly profound thing to deeply accept the radical equality of all life forms. But to embrace and honor the radical equality of all life forms, all life activity, absolutely transforms your life. That is what enchants your life. We have a very utilitarian way of thinking about life. We have a utilitarian way of thinking about our body. We curse our body when it is not well. That may be the body's way of saying, "Hullo, hang out with me. Check in! What's going on? You can't abuse me!" Do you see what I mean?

So, how do we learn to live with other isnesses? First we learn to live with ourselves. Love starts here [tapping the self]. So, how do we honor isness? We honor isness by honoring particularity, by honoring specificity, by honoring process, by paying attention, by not hierarchizing people, activities, anything! Right? And by being open to what such a process might teach us about self, about other, about nature, about society, about epistemology, about life.

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## **Interlude 6**

### **Music**

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**Kabir:** What, what path should I follow to get to know my own isness? And to be aware of the isness of things around me

**Lata:** If one of the characteristics of isness is particularity, specificity, distinctiveness, then it follows from that, that each individual's heart will yearn in a particular way toward truth or mind will lean in a particular direction in search of light or the body will long for something that the body is searching for, right? There are many many paths within the sort of Hindu-Buddhist tradition, specifically within the Hindu tradition I think it would be more accurate, we name these paths as bhakti, path of devotion; jnana, path of knowledge; karma, path of action and tantra.

Bhakti is a celebration and an honoring of isness, right? The path of tantra is celebrating, embracing and honoring isness but in a way that pays attention to sensation, physicality, matter, embodiedness, okay? Jnana is a way of honoring and embracing isness lovingly, paying attention to matter but also asking how did it come to be this way? How might I understand how it's all put together and what kind of dharmic innovation in understanding or perception, insight or wisdom might I be drawn toward in honoring, celebrating and embracing isness, right? And the path of karma does all of that but asks specifically, if there is some injury to isness or to isnesses, how might I heal it?

Traditionally there has been a hierarchy. People rarely talk of tantra except as some kind of esoteric, sometimes associated with animal sacrifices, sometimes associated with um strange sexual um rituals and so on. But tantra is prior to all of this; the very nature of the universe is tantric, right? And what do I mean by that? Tantra is a fluid triad. Tantra is a name for the triadic nature of isness you could say, okay? And what is that triad? *Self, Other, Connectivity; Self, Other, Divinity*. Right? If we think of the Shiva and we think of the Shakti triangles forming you know together in one you would have Self, Other, Connectivity and the other you would have Self, Other, Divinity so the self is connected both to God and to its own self and to other isnesses. You know, it's a beautiful prism, you could think of it as a prism.

In the bhakti path, the more you love, the more you know, the more you know, the more you feel, the more you feel, the more you want to heal, tend, be kind, take care, think of what it means to live in a loving relationship of intimacy with the rest of the universe. If you're on a jnana path; the more you know, the more you love, the more you feel, the more you want to take care. If you're on the tantra path, the more you feel, the more you love, the more you know, the more you want to heal. And if you're on a karma path; the more you heal, the more you act, the more you know, the more you love, the more you feel, right? And no path is superior to any

other path and no path can stand on its own.

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### Interlude 7

#### Silence, location sound

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Lata continues: In secular language it's often said, 'The devil is in the detail', but from tantric standpoint '*The divine is in every detail.*' And this is what brings the universe alive and this is what all wisdom traditions recognize, in the say in the practice of mindfulness so beautifully still maintained and practiced within Buddhism. Attention to breath, attention to every action - making tea, sweeping leaves. It's that attention to detail that brings you into a certain kind of sensuous contact with the universe which makes it impossible for you to see yourself as separate from that to which you are deeply related but which you misperceive as separate from yourself.

**Kabir:** I think I'd like to kind of take this term that you've used 'misperception' a little further. So clearly there are people who begin on these paths I mean just by virtue of their own inclinations and yet there comes a time when it seems like the path doesn't naturally unfold the way the way it should or people seem to get lost or they seem to get stuck at a certain place where they tend to perhaps glorify one way of being as opposed to moving on and walking the path as it unfolds.

**Lata:** You will notice that regardless of the path that you take the practices that you would be... that would be recommended to you would be similar. The intensity with which you practice a particular given method may vary. So for example regardless of whether you're a karma yogi, a jnana yogi, a tantra yogi or a bhakti yogi, meditation is critical: some practice of introspection, of understanding the architecture of self. If we're speaking of misperception we need to understand what is it I am misperceiving? The bottom line is it is something you discover. When you start ...when you begin with having hierarchized life activity, when you begin assuming that 'path A is good, outcome B is bad,' and having feelings and preferences, then you trip yourself up. But it's not easy to allow yourself to be transformed in this way. This willingness to allow yourself to die out of an old sense of self, or like a snake shed your skin; we have a lot of fear. There's a lot of fear of letting go that confronts the seeker and unless you make your way through the tapestry of that conditioning, it is very difficult to find your way through.

**Kabir:** It almost seems to me that you speak of this sense of we're not just a world of random objects; we are a communion of subjects. And I think this is something that we should speak about a little more because clearly we see the devastation around

us that has been caused... I mean it's almost an ecocide or a biocide in terms of what we are doing to the planet. And do you think following the path and becoming a little more aware of the principle of tantra on which this entire world or planet or universe rests uh would that change our relationship uh to the planet, to the world, to the universe?

**Lata:** I think that tantra has a lot to say that is of relevance for the world today because of the way in which it starts from the premise of sentience, of everything having sentience. It starts from the premise of the integrity of matter; and it starts from the premise that embodiment is sacred - the very fact of embodiment is sacred.

People often talk about the disenchantment of modern life. I do think that we may not be aware of tantra, but because the nature of the universe is tantric, we are naturally disenchanted because some part of us knows this truth already. It's just another part of us has forgotten and needs to undertake those practices to be able to start recognizing what another part of us already knows, right, and to bring it in alignment with the principles of the universe.

Of course the market will suggest that '*that* product, *that* experience, *that* sensation, *that* stimulus' is going to finally do it for you, right? But it's an endless chain that never delivers. It's constantly calling out to our sensorium but doing in a way in order to shortcut and cheat. I'm partly bringing in the market because it seems ironic to make a case for taking embodiment seriously, the body seriously and sensation seriously at a time when the market seems to be doing nothing but take those three things seriously. But it only *appears* to be taking those things seriously. They are there for it to manipulate, they are not there as subjects to return to the idea that we are relating to a world of subjects.

We are not the cognizing subject, human subject relating to inert matter, trying to conquer the world through our knowledge and our understanding. Rather we are trying to discover with the help of an always already alive and whole world. The world is always already whole, it is our perception of its wholeness that has been injured. It is a form of self-injury and other injury and it is that misperception that different practices from the different wisdom traditions are seeking to heal.

**Kabir:** So could you speak a little bit more about how can I then be present to my senses and what the feedback my senses are giving me on a day to day basis and yet not collapse into the market framework of 'Yes, my senses need to be fulfilled or satisfied. Or I will therefore follow my senses where they will take me.' And that's pretty much in one sense what the market does.

**Lata:** Go back to body. Be still. Even though the market may partialize, hierarchize, disaggregate you are always already in your whole state. Return to breath. Why is it that the breath is so important in so many traditions right? Return to the breath. It's a way of connecting body, mind and heart. It's a way of stilling the mind. It's a way of aligning yourself. If you return to the ground zero of body, you return to the ground zero of heart and then you allow mind to relax through whatever practices, it could be exercise, it could be martial arts. It could be following the breath. But no single technique works it has to be multiple, multiple techniques. So if you are trying to reconnect with your body, just running may not be enough. Loving your body is important, bathing with a full awareness, mindful awareness of your toes, of your posterior end, of your back, of the small of your back, being *that* aware bringing that kind of conscious awareness to every aspect of your body.

**Kabir:** If I, if one, had to explain the principle of tantra to people, to be able to say "This is another way of looking at the world, of looking at yourself, of being, this is another path that one could follow," how would we, how would we explain it?

**Lata:** Interconnectedness, Relationality, Self-Other connectivity. There's no self that's never always already connected to a billion other isnesses so learning to understand the nature of that connection. But in order to understand the nature of that connection you have to understand where you are located and in order to understand where you are located you also have to alongside learning where you are located, you understand who you are. Try to know your neighbors, you know, your neighboring isnesses: the city, the street, all the other beings, not just human, all the other energies that are around you. Be aware of the earth worm that even as you and I are trading torrents of words is noiselessly just turning over the soil right behind us, making it possible for the earth to be aerated. If that earthworm stops turning over the soil the earth will become untillable. Every action counts.

You also have to develop what might be called 'passionate detachment'. Generally, detachment is thought of as a state of not feeling, observing without feeling. That's not true. Detachment is observing carefully with deep feeling, but not reacting. Rather learning by inhabiting your objective feeling state, what might be the most appropriate nature of response, response being different from reaction, okay? But you are also trusting the inherently dharmic nature and tantric nature of the universe.

There's no adharma that will not meet its consequence. We may not notice the consequences right away, but it is a law of nature. Every empire has failed. The United States Empire is failing even now, right? You take any adharmic um phenomenon, it tends to self-destruct. Remembering that as a principle - in the same

way as we remember that gravity holds as a principle on earth - calms your consciousness. So even though you are aware of so much more because you have opened your awareness, that open awareness is within a sheltering understanding that 'Yes, I may be able to do just a little, but even that just a little matters a great deal.' In fact if people understood how much it matters, I think it would be hard for them to be as indifferent and casually indifferent and injurious as we as humans can be with each other, to each other, to self. Every little thing counts, every action, every sensation, every thought and if we could just open to that we would be living in a very different universe.

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### Interlude 8

*The broom is sweeping leaves off the sidewalk  
I imagine it is You clearing the cobwebs in my mind  
Dissolve me Mother, dissolve me into the ink black ocean of Your heart  
Rescue me Ma, rescue me, from the endless whirlpools of mind  
Awaken me please, awaken me, to my true God-given nature*

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Kabir: Lata we've spoken about tantra as a universal principle. Is it similar to dharma?

Lata: Now, another word for tantra would also be dharma understood in this context as acting on the basis of interdependence, interconnectedness, and the deep imbrication of every isness with every other isness. That is to say, isness is both an individual concept - each of us is isness - but it is also a collectivizing term - we also live in isness. When we act against that principle, we are acting in a way that violates the tantric nature of the universe which is also the dharmic nature of the universe.

Now the word dharma, as you know, perhaps very, very abused, perhaps more abused than almost any other term. Often it has referred to caste-based dharma so that there is Kshatriya dharma spoken of for example in aspects of the Mahabharata or the different caste dharmas referred to in an epic like the Ramayana. But dharma as we are understanding it in this context is not unique to any particular caste, any particular time, any particular people. It's a universal principle.

Within that it is certainly true that for each person, there is you can say with a small d, the process of discovering what is my dharma as an intellectual, what is my dharma as a lawyer, what is my dharma as a mother, what is my dharma as a partner, with a small d. There we go back to our questions of responsibility, response

ability, discovering what is our isness and engaging in those practices that enable us to introspect and therefore realize the full potential of our existence.

But that apart, the universe itself, its nature is dharmic. This is not to say, as we know, that people live in accordance with these principles. And as soon as you violate these principles you have what you might call adharma. So what we need to do is to ascribe, or experiment or contemplate or work with a notion of dharma that is closest to the nature of creation itself.

What does it mean to say that the universe is dharmic and at the same time that there is such ubiquity of suffering? It means one thing which is that we have misrecognized what it means to be human. What it also means on a more meta level is that despite human error, despite human misperception, despite individual and collective adharma, the universe at the meta level is hurtling toward dharma. The tendential lines of force, the momentum, the trajectory, tends toward dharma.

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### Interlude 9

*May we come to learn more and more what we've come to learn  
 May we come to be more and more what we've come to be  
 May we come to see more and more what we've come to see  
 May we begin shedding more and more what we've come to shed  
 We thank you, God, we thank you, Oneness  
 for dispersing this false sense of "I"  
 into a thousand fragments of dancing light  
 into so many roots under the earth  
 Deepen the silence within so each moment feels like a prayer unfolding  
 I am but a stone sinking into the well of your heart  
 May I rest forever at the bottom*

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Kabir: So how does one know what to do because the only way we know what we must do is in the context we are in, in that situatedness of should I do this or shouldn't I do that, or what is my role as an individual in the space I am in. And yet the principle, stands beyond, does it stand outside history?

Lata: The principle is *prior* to history. It is intrinsic to the nature of Creation itself. Conditioned knowledge is part of what it means to be human. So we have to always build into our practice an understanding of the fact that our knowledge is always already conditioned and part of what we are needing to free ourselves from is precisely that conditioning and all of the evaluative categories and modes of assessment that pertain to a given time and space.

This is not to say that forms of understanding that characterize a given time and space are erroneous. If you have a universe which celebrates specificity, we cannot say, "Let me go to the eternal, give me categories that hold across time and space." So, we can never give up the burden of interpretation, the responsibility of interpretation. And quite often, adharma is miasmatic interpretation. And by miasma what I mean is an illusory or delusory form of perception and following from that an illusory or delusory form of explanation. And I use both terms because illusion is when you see something that is not there and delusion is when you imagine something that is not there. When we have miasmatic thinking it has crossed the border into psyche.

One of the things that miasmatic frameworks do is disarticulate the relations between cause and effect and it is precisely in that disarticulation that you can genuinely not see the violence of a certain mode of apprehending the world. And you so genuinely not see it...the development paradigm, enormously violent, catastrophic for the planet, right? And yet there are so many people who feel there is no way forward but this. If that means displacement of farmers, if that means taking away the rights of tribals, so be it. What is it that perfectly reasonable people...what is it that leads perfectly reasonable people to take such an extraordinary position? Miasmatic thinking. This is what I mean by miasma bridging both the psyche and the mind. It is a form of injury. It's a form of injurious thinking. But it is so deeply held to be true that it becomes difficult to dislodge. And yet that is precisely what we need to do. And if humans do not act in concert, nature will.

We see it with climate change. Three hundred years of industrialization, the earth is responding. Lots of human beings are also responding but some people are only now willing to think about the idea of climate change because the earth has responded so forcefully. Unfortunately, from their perspective, the earth has responded furiously: Mother Nature's fury. Mother Nature is not furious! She is following her dharma. If deep oil drilling has led to volcanic activity under the sea bed, that pressure will have to be released somewhere. It can take the form of a tsunami, it can take the form of a volcano, it can take the form of earthquakes. That is the simple principle of karma unfolding.

So, if we think of karma, dharma, tantric dispassion, we can use these three as a way of orienting our activity. And knowing that we don't have to have faith in the sense in which people often talk about faith, something that is a belief that cannot be proven. We can rather start to think about faith as a form of precise recognition; recognition of how things actually are. Which as you know is the oldest epistemology, spiritual wisdom tradition epistemology, available to us. We are given orienting points and then told, "Go, experiment!"

Fundamental to all of this is that we need to give up the terror of diversity. If you think about it, the universe is infinitely diverse. If we are going to feel that that diversity needs to be tamed, whether we are talking about gender diversity, sexual diversity, biodiversity, social diversity, cultural diversity, we are going to try to live in a way that flies against the very intrinsic nature of Creation. And as soon as we do that, suffering is unleashed, personal, social, collective, societal, planetary.

Kabir: So, I'd like you to speak a little more about suffering as a consequence because clearly there is a huge amount of suffering experienced by people, by sentient beings around us who by themselves try to live dharmically. Shouldn't there be some dharma for people who are suffering for no fault of their own?

Lata: If we accept that relationality is a fundamental fact of Creation it means that even if one person is adharmic many others will suffer. Once we accept that then we cannot be surprised if there is suffering. You have free will, as humans we have free will. We can cooperate with the principles of the universe or we can resist them. And because we have resisted them and continue to resist them there is suffering.

Kabir: So it seems to live dharmically not just requires an intention to do so but a discipline, a certain discipline of living that way. Could you speak a little more about this discipline?

Lata: I'm so happy you brought that term up because if there is one thing that is often associated with spiritual practice or religious practice it's the notion of discipline and quite often it's a very punitive notion of discipline. The way I understand discipline within the framework that I have been taught, is that discipline is nothing other than a form of remembrance. Your discipline is to remember precisely these variables, these principles on which nature has manifested itself; these principles on the basis of which Creation actually exists. And if you remember steadily, calmly, breathing in, breathing out, always centered in the body, always having your feet on the ground even if your job is to fly in the air, what I mean is always being situated and aware of the inherent beauty and glory of your individual existence and the way in which you wish to dance in your isness: *that* is discipline.

Kabir: Thank you.